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## DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION STATE OF HAWAII

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### Seatbelt Usage Focus Group Findings

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## EXECUTIVE HIGHLIGHTS

- **Reasons For Not Wearing a Seatbelt**
  - Some of the drivers started out not wearing seatbelts because there was no law and/or there were no seatbelts in their vehicles.
  - Many of the participants provided reasons relating to discomfort.
  - A couple of the motorists admitted to wearing their seatbelts only when a child was present in the vehicle.
  - Other drivers did not think a seatbelt was necessary during short drives.
- **Seatbelt Law**
  - A couple of the participants argued that seatbelt usage should be personal choice rather than regulated by laws.
- **Started Wearing Seatbelts**
  - Some of the key influences that prompted seatbelt use came from advertisements, the seatbelt law, and improvements in seatbelt design.
- **Accidents**
  - A couple of the participants were closely related to accident victims, which influenced their decision to wear a seatbelt.
  - There were two sides of the argument for seatbelts during an accident.
    - Seatbelts decreased the likelihood of serious injury or death.
    - Seatbelts could lock up and trap an occupant in a burning car.
- **Backseat Usage**
  - A lot of the people who wore their seatbelts in the front seats on a regular basis were unlikely to wear a seatbelt in the backseat.
  - The participants did not wear a seatbelt in the backseat because they felt safer, and it was not mandatory.
  - Some of the focus group members were confused as to whether there was a seatbelt law for the backseat.
- **Insisting Others to Wear a Seatbelt**
  - Most of the participants said they left the decision to wear a seatbelt to the other occupants in their vehicle.
  - Of those who have asked other occupants to wear a seatbelt, they said their requests were never denied.
- **Airbags**
  - There were mixed reactions for the safety level of airbags when compared to seatbelts.
  - A couple participants thought an airbag offered enough protection when not using a seatbelt.
  - Other participants understood that seatbelts were more effective than airbags.

- **Automatic Seatbelts**
  - Quite a few participants thought that the automatic seatbelts were uncomfortable.
  - Some of the group members pointed out that automatic seatbelts only go across the occupant's chest.
  - An individual admitted to only using the chest strap and never buckling the lap harness.
- **Messages to Encourage Seatbelt Usage**
  - The participants were presented a couple of statistics on the effectiveness of seatbelts as well as the percentage of accidents that occurred within five miles of the driver's home.
  - The drivers said that statistics alone were not effective.
  - They suggested that the messages need to be presented with some images of the after effects of an accident when not using a seatbelt.
- **Enforcement**
  - Click It or Ticket was a major influence on some of the drivers to start wearing seatbelts.
  - The drivers said they wanted to avoid paying for a citation.
  - Click It or Ticket also helped drivers to develop the habit of using a seatbelt, which resulted in continuous usage well after the program's publicity.
  - There was a halo effect among some of the cited drivers, which prompted other people in close contact to start wearing a seatbelt in order to avoid a ticket.
- **Education**
  - Hawaii's driver's education program was criticized and improvements were suggested.
  - It was mentioned that laws could be forgotten over time because they are no longer reinforced during the written tests for a driver's license renewal.
  - Some participants noted that drivers that have migrated to the State were unclear about the laws.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Study Objectives**

SMS was commissioned by the Hawaii Department of Transportation to conduct a series of focus group discussions to gain a better understanding of traffic safety behaviors in the areas of extreme speeding, elderly pedestrians, motorcycle helmet usage, and seatbelt usage. The fourth round focus groups covered the topic of seatbelt usage by exploring perspectives of both full-time seatbelt users and those who wear a seatbelt from most of the time to never at all. This phase of the DOT study will be integrated with research findings from earlier stages in order to develop a social marketing campaign that will change the behaviors of drivers and passengers. The research objectives for this study were to determine:

- The seatbelt usage behavior as a driver and passenger
- The reason why the seatbelts are not used
- The influential messages and channels of communication to encourage seatbelt usage for drivers and passengers

### **Methodology**

The participants in the focus groups were recruited based on each session's target group. The recruitment was completed around the streets in Honolulu as well as through random telephone calls. An incentive of \$50.00 was offered during the recruiting. In addition, participants that arrived fifteen minutes early were eligible for a drawing to win an extra \$50.00.

The three sessions were conducted during evenings in January and December at SMS' in-house focus group facility. The first discussion had a mix of full-time and part-time seatbelt users, the second group consisted of drivers that wore a seatbelt most of the time or less, and the final group included males and females under the age of 30.

The seatbelt usage discussions were led by Barbara Sunderland, an experienced focus group moderator. Discussion guides were developed from the research objectives, which served as an outline for the main topics of each session. Additional areas were covered beyond the moderator's guide when undiscovered topics emerged.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Reasons For Not Wearing a Seatbelt

Many of the participants across the three focus groups did not wear their seatbelts all of the time and were able to provide their reasons. For some of the drivers, they started out not wearing a seatbelt at an early age or never had one in their car. Others who did not use a seatbelt gave reasons related to discomfort. Moreover, there were drivers that did not wear a seatbelt during certain situations. Some of the participants were influenced to wear their seatbelts only when their child was present. Also, a couple of the drivers did not think a seatbelt would be necessary during short drives.

#### Selected Comments

“When I first got my car, there were no seatbelts.”

“When I was a kid, we’d stick the lap belts into the seat and never wear them.”

“I never wore it because it’s so uncomfortable for me.”

“It’s not uncool, but sometimes it’s uncomfortable.”

“I don’t like seatbelts. I feel constricted.”

“I find it to be constricting. It feels like I’m being held down. It feels like I can’t turn my head to look.”

“I don’t like how it feels. The way it fits your chest. What matters is whether it’s adjustable, so it won’t hit your neck.”

“I hate the way the thing irritates my neck.”

“The chances of us to crash is small compared to the irritation of the thing.”

“Sometimes I forget to buckle up if I’m impatient or in a rush.”

“Seatbelts effect yourself, and speeding effects other drivers.”

“In a sense, you’re only hurting you if you’re not wearing it.”

“You don’t drive better or worse with it or without it on.”

“If I’m driving with my child, I always have my seatbelt on. She reminds me. If I’m driving a couple of blocks, I don’t wear a seatbelt and with my child not in the car.”

“I don’t wear it when my kid’s aren’t in the car. They complain if I do not, ‘If you don’t use yours, then why do I have to use mine.’”

“I feel that way sometimes, making a short drive between stores. I don’t think I have to wear it.”

“Where I work at, I make a short drive on a main road, and I don’t wear my seatbelt. I sometimes feel guilty.”

“If I drive to Safeway, more than likely I don’t wear my belt on short drives.”

“The only time I don’t do it is if I go a couple of blocks away. Sometimes I forget.”

“I always head out without it on. Usually, when I hit the freeway, I start thinking, ‘Well, if I get in a crash, I’d pretty much need a seatbelt.’ Then I put it on...I don’t know the reason why I don’t put it on. I think it’s the fit. I don’t really know the true reason. It’s not until I’m doing 60 that the thought that I might get into an accident, I put it on.”

## **Seatbelt Law**

The participants continued with arguments that seatbelt usage should be personal choice rather than being forced to wear one by law. On the other hand, one member acknowledged that the seatbelt law was successful in increasing compliance.

### Selected Comments

“I think that making the law to put a seatbelt on absolutely changed behavior. There’s no doubt in my mind about that.”

“I don’t think there should be a law or fines if you choose not to wear a seatbelt... I wear my seatbelt because it’s a wise thing to do, but for someone who does not, there should not be a law.”

“I think seatbelts should be your own choice.”

“If you don’t want to wear a seatbelt...if you opt to risk your life, it should be your choice. That’s how I feel.”

“I think you could encourage people rather than have a law.”

“No one challenged the law on seatbelts, no one knows if it could be overturned like the law on motorcycle helmets.”

“I don’t think it should be a real issue in Hawaii because the state turns over a lot of money to run this program.”

## **Started Wearing Seatbelts**

A few of the focus group members recalled the first times they started wearing a seatbelt. Advertisements, the seatbelt law, and improvements in seatbelt design were among the primary reasons the drivers started to buckle up.

### Selected Comments

“I was influenced by all of the advertising aimed at people about wearing seatbelts and a little bit by getting a ticket.”

“I started wearing a seatbelt when they made it a law. I can’t recall...70s...80s?”

“I still didn’t wear seatbelts until it became the law in Hawaii.”

“I didn’t start wearing seatbelts on a regular basis until they had the kind that go across your chest. When it was just the ones across your lap, I never wore those. The lap part was always uncomfortable and whenever you come to a quick stop, you always lurch forward.”

“Part of it is, how much do you value life? I want to be there for my daughter, so I would wear my seatbelt. Part of it is forgetfulness. It changed my life after I had a child. I started wearing my seatbelt.”

“My mother wouldn’t wear one, but when she got that lambskin thing, she started wearing it all the time.”

## **Accidents**

There were mixed reactions among the participants when the issue of car accidents was raised. Some people were convinced to start wearing a seatbelt after being in or hearing about a car accident. Others did not change their behavior of non-usage after an accident. On one side, most of the drivers realized that seatbelts do save your life and decrease the risk of serious injury. The counterargument was that seatbelts could possibly trap a person by locking up. This was backed with first hand accounts from the participants talking about times that they were able to escape from a wreck because they were not locked in with a seatbelt.

### Selected Comments

“The accidents didn’t make me wear a seatbelt because I was still young and stupid.”

“I wear one all the time now... I didn’t have a seatbelt on when I hit the wall. I was lucky.”

“I think the only thing that scared me to always wear a seatbelt was when my cousin died at 23. He got thrown out from the backseat. His mother talked to me and said for me to always wear a seatbelt.”

“When I was small, my cousin was only 8 years old, and he got ejected when he got into an accident... He didn’t have a seatbelt on. His brother did. His brother is still alive today. The other one flew out of the window... In the family it got addicting about everyone wearing a seatbelt.”

“I think that seatbelts can go either way. Some people get killed because they are trapped in seatbelts. I also think that if you’re going to die, you’re going to die. It’s just my philosophy.”

“One of my friends doesn’t wear a seatbelt at all. His philosophy is, ‘Look, if you’re going to get into an accident, it’s all meant to be. There’s nothing that can help because some people always wearing their seatbelt die anyway. They can get trapped inside, the car catches on fire, and there rest is history. There’s been cases that people get ejected from a car and survive, but if they were inside the vehicle, they wouldn’t of made it.’”

“I always had mixed feelings about wearing seatbelts. When I was younger, I knew these two friends that got into an accident. The guy wasn’t wearing a seatbelt and survived. The girl was wearing a seatbelt and hit her head and died.”

“I think more often than not, it’s flying out that kills you.”

“I know incidents where people could of survived without a seatbelt. One could of gotten out of a burning car.”

“I came across an accident. A pick-up was upside down. He was trapped in his vehicle and gas was leaking all over the road. The seatbelt was locked with the weight of his body.”

“I have the same fear about getting in an accident and not being able to get out, but I’m even more worried about getting ejected. I’m about 80% for and 20% against because of getting trapped.”

“I got into an accident when I was 21... I was not wearing a seatbelt. The vehicle flipped three times over...I was able to get pulled out because I wasn’t strapped in... I can’t say if seatbelts make you safer because it saved my life not wearing a seatbelt.”



“I’m not convinced that it’s safer.”

“You should always have a device to cut your seatbelt. They are very easily available. I bought one for me and my wife. It’s a little device with a hammer on one end and a little blade on the inside of the plastic on the other side.”

“After driving for so long and having a couple of fender benders, it’s so easy to get into an accident. A seatbelt seriously helps in reducing the chance for a more serious injury.”

“I hear about accidents all the time, but it doesn’t motivate me to wear a seatbelt.”

“Truthfully, I never think anything is going to happen to me.”

### **Backseat Usage**

Although some of the drivers wore seatbelts on a regular basis as a driver, they were less likely to also wear a seatbelt as a backseat passenger. This could be contributed to both not having a universal seatbelt law as well as the perceived increase of safety while sitting in the backseat. Moreover, a few participants were unsure about a law for seatbelt usage in the backseat.

### **Selected Comments**

“I only wear my seatbelt as a driver or passenger, not in the backseat. I don’t feel as if I’m unsecured in the backseat. It goes with how when you were younger and your parents would put you in the backseat to be safe.”

“Nobody cares like, ‘No worries, we’re in the back.’”

“Only when I’m in the front seat and not in the backseat.”

“In the backseat, I wear them once in a while, it depends on who’s driving the vehicle.”

“I never realized the importance of wearing them in the backseat until my wife got into an accident with my three boys. The boys were in the backseat wearing seatbelts... The seatbelts prevented them from getting any type of dangerous injury. From then on, I’ve worn seatbelts in the front and backseat.”

“If you do it in the front seat, there’s not that much difference doing it in the backseat as well.”

“It’s not a law in the backseat right?”

“I thought it was the law [for the backseat] because I’m from Wisconsin... It’s only \$10, and they publish your name in the paper. It’s the shame factor and tiny financial.”

“I thought you had to buckle up in the backseat. I thought that was the law here.”

“I heard something like, if you’re in the backseat and you’re under a certain age and you have to buckle up.”

### **Insisting Others to Wear a Seatbelt**

Most of those that answered said that they would probably not ask another person to buckle up. They believed it was the other occupant’s responsibility to wear a seatbelt. On the other hand, of those who did ask others to wear a seatbelt, no one reported resistance from the other occupant.

#### Selected Comments

“I gave a little old lady a ride this afternoon. Halfway to her house, I realized she wasn’t wearing a seatbelt, and I got nervous. I was almost to her house, so I didn’t bother telling her to put it on.”

“I don’t insist on people in the backseat to buckle up.”

“I wouldn’t say it, it would be your responsibility to wear it.”

“I never checked a lot of times if the person in the backseat is buckled up or not.”

“I’d say it’s up to you.”

“There’s a difference between ask and tell. I don’t tell anybody to wear a seatbelt, I just ask them.”

“Most times, when I ask them, they wear it.”

“If I made you buckle up, then I’d buckle up.”

“I won’t let my husband drive if he doesn’t have his seatbelt on.”

## **Airbags**

There were mixed reactions for the amount of protection a airbag offers compared to a seatbelt. Only a few participants felt that an airbag alone provides enough protection in an accident. Others understood that seatbelts were more effective.

### Selected Comments

“Don’t you think sometimes that an airbag might protect you? I do.”

“I don’t know, I think an airbag protects you more than a seatbelt.”

“Both are just as effective, I think.”

“Both are the same, but the seatbelt works more because it stops you from going forward.”

“The car I have doesn’t have airbags... I think seatbelts offer more protection than airbags.”

“I’d say seatbelt because not all of the time the airbag deploys.”

## **Automatic Seatbelts**

Some of the participants brought up the topic of automatic seatbelts. Of those that had or were aware of the devices, a couple complained about the discomfort. While a few noted that the seatbelt only goes across the occupant’s chest, one of the participants admitted to never using the lap harness.

### Selected Comments

“When you turn on the ignition, the belt automatically goes on.”

“I wouldn’t buy a car with the automatic seatbelt. I don’t like those.”

“Those are always riding up my neck. If I have a wreck, they would probably choke me to death.”

“Those are uncomfortable, they go against your neck sometimes.”

“It’s the kind that go across the shoulder, and you have to make it go across your lap.”

“A lot of people that have the automatic harness don’t wear the lap belt, and the lap belt is very important.”

“I don’t put on the lap belt, I just use the shoulder harness... I don’t know if that’s against the law.”

### **Messages to Encourage Seatbelt Usage**

The moderator presented the focus group members with a few messages and statistics such as “Seatbelts reduce the rate of fatal injury by 45%” and “About 50% of auto accidents occur within five miles of the driver’s home.” A couple of the participants perceived the statistics as good reminders but said the statistics alone were not completely effective in influencing seatbelt usage. The group continued by providing their own suggestions on how to administer safety messages to encourage seatbelt usage. Many of their suggestions included a visual presentation of the consequences of a serious car accident while not wearing a seatbelt.

### **Selected Comments**

“I don’t need that type of advertising for me to conduct myself.”

“I think it’s a good reminder, and we forget.”

“For most of us here, we’re all old and set in our ways. I don’t think any new advertisements will make me change my ways...If you want to influence, you’ve got to influence the kids. You’re not going to influence us anymore.”

“I think you should put out a message to make it look foolish not to wear a seatbelt.”

“You shouldn’t be ramming down statistics, but say it’s not cool to not wear a seatbelt.”

“The younger you are, the less the statistics mean anything.”

“I think statistics are good reminders, but it shouldn’t be the focus.”

“When you sit down in your car, you’re not thinking about statistics.”

“If there were statistics that showed that people were protected when they wear their seatbelt...and some bad image of bad things happening to your body. That would maybe make me click it.”

“If you’re going to charge us for everybody in the car that does not have a seatbelt on, that would be an effective message.”

“How about the type of commercial where the police officers are stopping cars and telling people to buckle up or get ticketed.”

“You know those commercials, ‘I had a friend that died, I know because I was the drunk driver.’ Those are so powerful. Those ads are depressing, but they are so powerful. It brings it as if it’s not you’re family, but it brings an emotional attachment like it could be your family.”

“Maybe a commercial with a little angel tapping someone on the shoulder telling them about someone that passed away who wasn’t wearing a seatbelt.”

“Have them watch videos when they’re waiting to get their licenses.”

“It’s got to be visual for the kids.”

“The one thing that changed me were those commercials with the crash dummies... That image is still in my mind. How far you fly. It made me also realize that any object in the backseat of my car becomes a potential weapon, so there’s no flying pens and things anymore.”

“I think if we had a commercial that compared a person in a seatbelt and not in a seatbelt... The dummy just doesn’t look real... I would definitely be more affected if it’s more realistic.”

## **Enforcement**

Enforcement, specifically the recent Click It or Ticket campaigns, was a key influencer in getting drivers to wear seatbelts. A couple of the participants across the three focus groups had not started wearing seatbelts after an accident but were willing to wear one in order to avoid a citation. The high price coupled with the catchy phrase seemed to capture the attention of many of the former non-users. In fact, a couple of the drivers said that the enforcement helped them develop the habit and understand the safety reasons for seatbelt usage. In addition, one participant spoke of a halo effect in which a citation influenced others in close contact to buckle up.

### Selected Comments

“When I see a cop, I put it on.”

“I don’t want to go to classes. You know, if you get caught, you have to go to four hours of classes.”

“I mainly wear them all the time now because of Click It or Ticket.”

“The Click It or Ticket works because they’re enforcing it.”

“The reason I started was because of the ticket. Now, I do it because it’s a habit and a safety issue.”

“Tickets help us get started.”

“I got my first ticket for not wearing a seatbelt... I still always wear a seatbelt because I don’t want to get a ticket anymore.”

“Generally speaking, I never wore seatbelts, but I did strap my kids in. What made me start was when I got a ticket. It was \$75.”

“I didn’t realize it wasn’t one ticket for the vehicle, but one for everybody inside.”

“People around me started to wear seatbelts after I got a ticket. Even my dad started wearing it, and he was always against it.”

“The only reason my husband wears a seatbelt is because he’s a cheapskate, he does not want to pay for that seatbelt fine.”

“If people know about programs like Click It or Ticket, it encourages them to wear one.”

“That Click It or Ticket thing. I thought it was pretty cool. Everybody always had it in their head. They’d see the commercial, and you have a real catchy way of saying it, ‘Click-it or Ticket, ah man!’”

“That Click It or Ticket really worked... If it’s really catchy, it will work.”

“For a \$100 fine, I think it would definitely make me wear my seatbelt.”

“My fear isn’t getting a ticket, it’s safety.”

## Education

Some of the participants recalled their early years when they first participated in driver's education. The other group members criticized Hawaii's driver's education program and made suggestions for improvement. They mentioned that there were some drivers who are not educated on certain laws while others have forgotten the laws over time because there is no longer testing during the license renewal process.

### Selected Comments

"I took driver's ed when I was 16. I didn't want to take it from the school because it took too long."

"I remember a few films that would scare you a little bit about not wearing a seatbelt."

"If someone showed a film, I'd put it on if awareness was raised."

"Hawaii has very poor drivers, seatbelts are not going to help them drive, education is."

"I think driver education here is very poor."

"You cannot find a class for defensive driving anymore."

"Foreign drivers are not educated to the laws or to safety."

"I had to retake my drivers license tests seven years ago when I went to get a new Hawaii license. I was surprised at the questions that I failed at. I thought I knew everything... You forget."

"I think after a certain age, you should be tested again... I mean if you've been driving so many years, everybody would be retested."

"The testing is a really good idea. I remember getting my license renewed and retaking the test. It really makes you think about these laws."

"As far as people in general, it's kind of hard to educate people about wearing a seatbelt and things of that nature when they really haven't directly experienced anything first hand, like the loss of my cousin. Those things make more of an impact on us than seeing a commercial or seeing an ad in the magazine. I don't think there's anything we can do to take the place of those things."